The Four Tetrads

August 4, 2024

One day the Buddha mentioned to the monks that they should practice mindfulness of breathing. And one of the monks said, “I already do that.” Now this was a monk who didn’t have an especially good reputation. So the Buddha asked him, “What kind of mindfulness of breathing do you practice?” He said, “I try to put away all thoughts of desire for the past and the present future, get rid of any irritation in the present moment, and just mindfully breathe in, and breathe out.” Which sounds like the meditation instructions you usually get when you hear about breath meditation. But the Buddha said, “Well, there is that kind of mindfulness of breathing, but it’s not the kind that gives the best results.” Then he proceeded to teach his 16 steps. The question is, why would he teach all those 16 steps? What advantage are they? Do they give? You notice that the 16 steps fall into four tetrads. In other words, four sets of four. The first tetrad has to do with the body. The second tetrad has to do with feelings. The third has to do with the mind. The fourth has to do with Dhammas, or mental qualities. And it’s not the case that you do one, two, three, four, five, six, seven. It’s more that each of the tetrads is practiced in parallel with the others. This points to the fact that when you’re focusing on the breath, especially with the body, feelings, and mind, those three things have to come together. The body here, of course, would be the breath. And you’re trying to create a feeling of well-being. And you want your mind to be concentrated. You want to bring those three things together, so that they fill the body together. The breath fills the body. The feeling of ease fills the body. Your awareness fills the body. That’s the ideal state of concentration. But when you try to settle down, you find it’s not ideal yet. So you have to ask yourself, what’s the problem? Is the problem with the breath? Is the problem with the feeling? Is the problem with the mind? If the problem is the breath, the Buddha has you notice long breathing and short breathing. That seems to be a shorthand term for notice whether the breath is shallow or deep, heavy, light, fast, slow. See that there are variations in the breath. Become sensitive to them. And then you can decide what kind of breathing you want. Then he says try to then fill the whole body with your awareness. Then he says to calm bodily fabrication. Now bodily fabrication is another term for the in-and-out breath. And the question is, why would the Buddha use a tactical term? And the answer seems to be that he’s trying to get you sensitive to the fact that the breath is something that you shape intentionally. Whether you’re alert to your shaping or not, it’s something that involves some intention. It’s like a stereo, you can turn it up, you can turn it down. Other places he says before you calm the breath, first energize it. So it takes some good long deep in-and-out breaths. So air out the body. Then as the body feels refreshed by the breath, then you can allow it to calm down. You don’t force it to stop. You don’t force it to get more subtle. You just allow it. Give the body whatever it needs. And as you sit here very still, the needs of the body grow less and less. And the breath can naturally calm down. That’s if the problem is with the breath. If the problem is with the feeling, if you don’t feel really comfortable being here, you can ask yourself this. Are there pains or is it simply just a neutral feeling? And the Buddha recommends that you breathe in a way that gives rise to a sense of refreshment. What kind of breathing would feel refreshing right now? This often has to do with your conception of what’s happening as you breathe in. Remember the Buddha’s not talking about the air coming in and out of the nose. He’s talking about the movement of energy in the body that allows the air to come and go out. Where does that energy happen? It happens in all the blood vessels. It happens in all the nerves. In some spots it’s more obvious than others. And you find some parts of your body you’re more sensitive to how it feels. But think of it as a whole body process. All your blood vessels are breathing in. All your nerves are breathing in. See if that’s refreshing. If it’s refreshing then it’s going to feel pleasant. It’s going to be easier to stay here. If there are pains in other parts of the body, for the time being you don’t have to pay attention to them. Work on the parts of the body that you can make comfortable. Then later on you’ll be ready to move in and investigate the pains. But first give yourself an alternative place to stay. And the Buddha says to become sensitive to mental fabrication. Now mental fabrication is another term for perceptions and feelings. You’re already working with feelings. Now you want to become more sensitive to the images that you hold in mind and how they influence the way you breathe. Like the image just now of the whole nervous system breathing or the whole set of blood vessels breathing. That’s an image you can put in your mind. See what that does to the way you breathe. If that image doesn’t help you can think of other images that first energize you and then calm you down. That’s if the feelings are the problem. You want to arrive at a sense of satisfied equanimity. Notice the Buddha doesn’t force you to be equanimous right from the very beginning. He does recommend that you try to be solid and still as you observe the breath. But when he encourages equanimity, it’s after you had a sense of rapture, after you had a sense of refreshment and pleasure. You already had a sense of satisfaction. Then it’s a lot easier to be equanimous in an open-hearted way. That’s feeling. As for the mind, if you’re having trouble settling down, ask yourself what’s the problem in the mind? Does it have an issue from the day that’s weighing down on you? What is the kind of mind that says, “Well now that I have nothing else that I have, let me wander off and think about the things I want to think about.” In other words, look for the direction the mind is leading. And then you try to gladden the mind with the idea of being right here instead of going off into those thought worlds. It’s much better to be right here with the breath coming in, the breath going out. You can gladden the mind in several ways. One is by breathing in ways that feel really refreshing. Holding in mind perceptions that are really expansive and satisfying. And if you have trouble staying with the breath, you might want to use another topic of meditation like the recollection of the Buddha, recollection of the Dhamma, the Sangha. Recollection of your own virtue, recollection of your own generosity, to put you in the right mood to settle down. Then you can drop those other themes and come back to the breath. Once the mind has been gladdened then you can get it concentrated. Just really focused right here, really feeling at home, staying right here. And John Chalk gives the image of a house with one chair. You’re in the one chair in the house. Everybody else in the house has to stand. But when you’re in the one chair, you’re in charge. And as the mind begins to settle in, you begin to realize that all you’re thinking about is adjusting the breath and adjusting the mind to fit with the breath. It isn’t needed anymore. You can release it from those thoughts. Just be with the sensation of the breath. Be one with the sensation of the breath coming in and going out. That’s called releasing the mind. As for the last tetrad, mental qualities, that’s for dealing with any thoughts that would leave the mind, leave the mind in the present moment and go off someplace else. The Buddha says you want to contemplate the fact that those things are inconstant. When they’re inconstant, of course, they’re stressful and not-self. To the point where you have a feeling of dispassion for them, you’re not interested. The thoughts will fall away. Then you don’t even have to think about stopping them anymore because they’re gone. So you let go of that conversation inside and you come back to the breath. So you can begin to see why the Buddha would have 16 steps like this. It’s helping to get you sensitive to what’s going on in the body, sensitive to what’s going on in the mind. It gives you a sense of how much you really are in charge of things here. You’re not just a passive observer looking at things over which you have no control. You do have control over the way you breathe, over the kind of feelings that you have in the body, the states of mind. Because the Buddha wants you to see that concentration is something you do. It’s a kind of karma, good karma. But because it’s karma, it’s going to have its results. So you check your mind by the results of what you’re doing. But because it’s karma, it also means that those results are not going to be permanent. The Buddha is reminding you that you want to look for something better. After all, if it’s fabricated, the breath is fabricated, your thoughts are fabricated, and the instructions by which you tell yourself all these things, those are verbal fabrications. So it’s got all three kinds of fabrications covered here. The Buddha wants you to be constantly sensitive to the aspect of you’re doing all this. You’re shaping all this with your intentions. He’s trying to get you to shape them as well as you can. And you can see that even with the best fabrications, the best intentions, they can take you only so far. That’s preparing you for the next step, which will be to let go entirely. But before you let go, you have to learn how to master this skill. Because only when you’ve mastered the skill of how you fabricate the present moment can you really understand what these fabrications are good for, what their limitations are. You let them go with understanding, not because somebody told you to let them go. Because you realize that there is an alternative. There is something better. But you get to that something better only by following this path. So pay attention to how you breathe, pay attention to your feelings, pay attention to the mind. Remind yourself you are not just stuck with whatever you’ve caught. It’s like going into a kitchen and finding that you have nothing but raw potatoes. Maybe potatoes weren’t what you want. But you don’t have to eat raw potatoes. You can fix them, you can cook them, you can do all kinds of things with them. That’s what the Buddha’s teaching you here with these 16 steps of breath meditation, all the different skills for cooking the mind, cooking your body, cooking your feelings. So they provide you with a good meal. At the same time they teach you about how you cook the whole rest of your experience. So you’re practicing calm and insight at the same time. And when they go together like this, both of them are strong.

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